

# Cremation

By Stan Goldstein

The Steelmantown National Cemetery in Steelmantown, New Jersey, right, and the Westwood Hills Memorial Park in Placerville, California, below, offer natural burials. (Right photo credit: Rich and Janine Falk/Falkportraits.com. Photo below courtesy of Ed Bixby)

## Celebrating a Life ... with a *Destiny*

When Ed Bixby wanted to promote his newest venture, Destination Destiny, he made sure to send out a slick color brochure that would catch the attention of funeral directors.

“I had a marketing plan and started sending brochures out from the end of July to the middle of September to funeral directors in the New Jersey-Philadelphia region, California, Oregon, Nevada and New York,” Bixby said. “We did the brochures in such a way that when the funeral directors got them, they couldn’t help but look at it. It piqued their interest. I know they are busy so I didn’t want them to chuck it in the trash but rather put it in the drawer and at one point look through it. Many have followed up with us and said they want to be a part of Destination Destiny.”

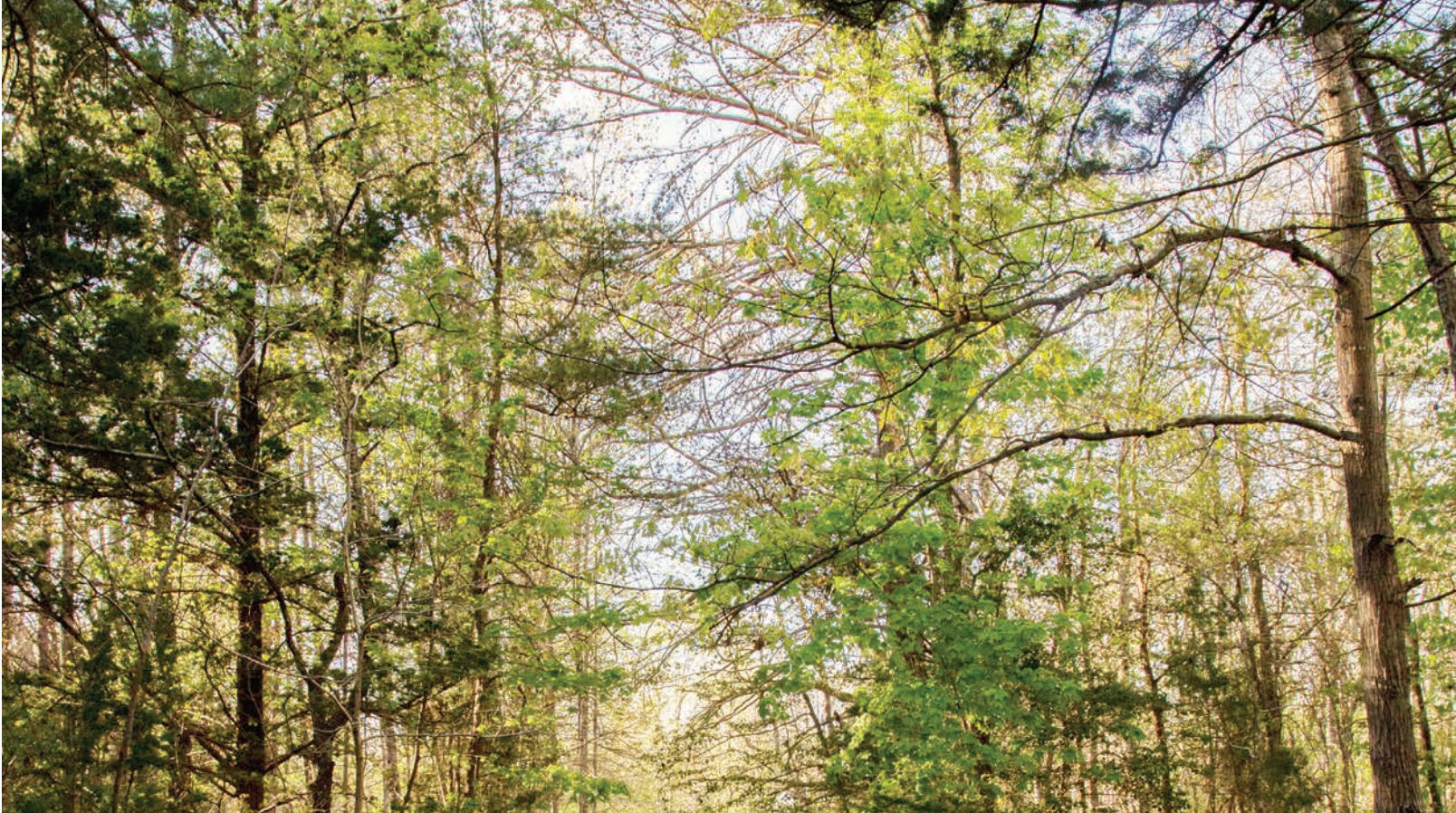
What Bixby, 49, is promoting is an organization that provides destination funeral and life celebration

services by conjoining funeral service with specialty resting place locales, travel agencies and event planning professionals. Destination Destiny offers packaged services for destination funerals, memorials and other life celebration events.

“People should look to us as the future. What we offer is a new beginning,” he said. “We are offering a beautiful way to find solace and closure in one’s passing but also an acceptance of the life that was lived. Who would not want to be surrounded by nature, life and laughter forever? The simplest form of disposition can feel good, not be overwhelming. Don’t overthink that process and your loved one will be in good hands forever.”











**The natural burial process preserves land with minimum impact on the environment and those laid to rest become one with the earth. (Photo courtesy of Ed Bixby)**

Bixby, the owner of the Steelmantown Cemetery Co. in Steelmantown, New Jersey, created a cemetery business model that embraces the life in the death, surrounded by nature and the living in a natural environment. Steelmantown Cemetery Co. operates five cemeteries: Steel-mantown National Cemetery, Steelmantown, New Jersey; Purissima Historic Cemetery, Half Moon Bay, California; Historic Columbian Cemetery, Portland, Oregon; Moravian High Acres, Canadensis, Pennsylvania; and Westwood Hills Memorial Park, Placerville, California.

He's in development to add four more locations where cremated remains may be placed in the United States to be part of Destination Destiny.

"One is in Maryland along the Eastern Shore, another is in Polk County, Wisconsin, right next to Minneapolis and St. Paul," Bixby said. "A third is along the San

Gabriel Mountains located in the Antelope Valley of California and a location in Humboldt County, California.

"Humboldt County is where the redwood trees are. We have an old lodge. Families will be able to come there, stay at the facility and have the celebration of life there," he added.

He's also planning to go international with a location in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, and at the Telemark Ski Resort in Asiago, Italy.

"The Telemark location belongs to my partner, Steve Berkoff. Why not have and find locations that are centered around daily life and recreation? If you like to ski, especially in the Alps, imagine taking your loved one's remains and scattering them along a trail in the Alps," Bixby said. "Ski resorts are closed six months a year, this could open them up to more opportunities, creating more reasons for people to go there."

## Moving Forward

Bixby first began developing Destination Destiny seven years ago. "I sat in a room with some of my friends, attorneys in Philadelphia – big franchise attorneys – and they all liked the idea. It was too soon at the time, but they said keep developing what you are doing with the cemeteries and keep us in the loop," he said. "About a year and a half ago I felt the time was right and started working on everything."

Among the services offered are full body natural burial and tree of life cremation burial.

The natural burial process preserves land with minimum impact on the environment and those laid to rest become one with the earth. There is no embalming fluid used, traditional caskets are not used and the use of a burial vault is prohibited. The deceased is placed in a biodegradable burial container or fabric shroud and the body or container is placed in direct contact with the earth, allowing the body to decompose naturally. Natural burial gravesites are dug by hand with the typical natural burial depth being between 3 to 5 feet.

The tree of life cremation burial is where the cremated remains are mixed directly with the native soil and laid to rest with a tree or shrub planted above the cremated remains. The plant life serves as the memorial to the interred.

"We're looking for restoration projects in environmentally sensitive areas. We can make a real ecological impact in what we are doing," Bixby said. "Grandma won't be just a tree; she will be part of an ecosystem. It's about her being a part of the forest."

"To a family who would put grandma on a mantel, they don't know what they are going to do with the cremated remains. Ten million remains may sit on mantels. Instead plant the remains with a white oak tree that will live for 500 years," he added.



## Out to Sea

Destination Destiny also offers two ocean-centered options: cremated remains sea scattering and memorial reef installations.

Scattering at sea is a time-honored and respectful method of scattering cremated remains in the open ocean. Federal regulations state these ceremonies can happen no less than three nautical miles from land.

The underwater memorial reefs, also known as reef balls, are designed to strengthen ecological habitats. The reefs are made by adding cremated remains to a specially formulated concrete designed to foster marine life. During the installation process, the memorial reef is transported to the reef location and placed on the sea floor. There are multiple reef ball sizes to choose from and a bronze plaque can be installed with the family member's name, lifespan and other information.

In addition to the ski resort in Italy, Bixby has partnered with Berkoff, manager of Memorial Reefs International, on the Destination Destiny memorial reefs project. Memorial Reefs International, based in Kapolei, Hawaii, was created to enhance coral generation, increase marine biomass and provide eco-friendly alternatives to traditional burials. Its mission is to rehabilitate and protect the world's ocean ecosystems through the development and use of ecologically sound artificial reef technology.

"Steve and I have known each other for a long time. I knew he didn't have locations at the Jersey Shore. I live in Ocean City, New Jersey," Bixby said. "I am a cemetery company. I do have the ability to sell plots. So I suggested to Steve why don't we partner up and offer prearrangement plots. We can prearrange cremation niches with the guarantee that if they later don't want to go into a reef system, they could go into a Steelmantown facility."



**Underwater memorial reefs are made by adding cremated remains to a specially formulated concrete designed to foster marine life. (Photos courtesy of Memorial Reefs International)**

With locations from Venice, Italy, to Cozumel, Mexico, Berkoff agreed that the Northeast would be an excellent place for new undersea memorial gardens. On Sept. 25, four reef balls were deployed off of Ocean City. The families who attended followed social-distancing protocols.

"With the reef ball, just like everything with Destination Destiny, it's a hands-on experience. The families and loved ones are involved every step of the way," Bixby said. "Families can help create the 'jewel' with the cremated remains, which is then glued into the reef ball before installation. The installation can be a multi-day event to truly celebrate the life and legacy of the person who has passed away."

"The day of deployment, the reef balls are loaded onto a barge in the morning. The friends and family

members go on a boat, meet the barge, and throw flowers overboard, that's the service," he added. "After that, we come back to the dock and can have a celebration dinner. The participants feel good with that. It's all part of the package we offer."

There's also a "Now and Later" option for people interested in creating a reef while they are still alive.

"These reefs are the same as the memorial reefs but they get a reef ball in the water now so the reef can grow and develop over time," Bixby said. "This allows people to see how their reef ball is helping the environment before passing away. They can live knowing they got a real benefit from their final funeral arrangement. They can get on a boat and see the 'now' reef ball and know their remains will be there. Their legacy will live on underwater."

### Among the Redwoods

From the ocean to the forest, Bixby is eager to open by the spring the destination in northern California among the redwood trees. It's located on 35 acres adjacent to Richardson Grove State Park in Garberville.

"We will be interring cremated remains there with two options. The first will be along our memorial walk. Our trail will be lined with stones and the remains can be mixed in with the direct earth and then have a natural stone on top of it," he said. "The other option will be part of a tree planting. Take a redwood sapling, chose a location and bury those cremated remains in the earth."

With the lodge, Bixby sees this as an ideal spot to have a family gathering of more than a day to celebrate the life of a loved one.

"When a family arrives they will have their own cabin and there will be activities like meditation and yoga," he said. "They will have time to reflect as a family. It will make it a memorable send-off."

A memorable send-off is Bixby's goal for all his endeavors. "Like we do at Steelmantown, we don't want people to run out quickly after a service. We want them to congregate and come back later on at some point," he said. "Who wants to go somewhere that makes them feel bad? It's not about the cemetery or the funeral directors. It's about the experience. We want them to have a good experience with it."

"You have to help release them from something. That's what our concept is, the destination part of it is. Have a good time and associate the place where the celebration of life takes place with happiness. It's about creating a space and accommodating the families to come to that space," he added. "We want to make funerals memorable. A lot of people don't want to remember that day. You can't make that the defining moment. You have to celebrate the life that was lived."

### Partner with Funeral Homes

Bixby has a "Partnering Home Program" where funeral homes and service providers that agree to display, promote and sell Destination Destiny services will be listed as an approved, natural burial funeral home on its website.

"We have always been funeral director friendly and understand the needs and benefits of having a funeral director involved in the process. We are trying to teach the funeral directors the services that we have to offer," he said.

"We are saying to the funeral directors: We would like you to partner with us, there's no obligation. Look at what we are doing and become a part of a referral network. We would like you to use one of our facilities and make it a part of your revenue stream," Bixby added. "When people go to our website, they will look at our directory and find the closest funeral director to them."

Being environmental friendly is a major part of Destination Destiny's mission.

"We offer all eco-friendly options to a family," Bixby said. "A funeral director can look at what we offer and say, 'This is different.' It exposes them to a new customer base. It's a simple alternative and can be done tastefully. Everyone wins – the families, funeral director and the environment. Eco-friendly funeral options are the future of funeral service," he added. "We strive to create a better future by stewarding the environment while celebrating the life that was lived and how that individual chose to live their life." •



**Right: Ed Bixby, the owner of the Steelmantown Cemetery Co. and founder of Destination Destiny. (Photo credit: Rich and Janine Falk/ Falkportraits.com)**